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Two Designs for a Home-Made Berry Picker

This article details two berry picker projects which are ideal for picking berries such as bilberries and cowberries. Both designs have a series of stiff prongs like a comb. The pickers are used by pushing the comb through the foliage; the berries, being too large to pass between the prongs, get plucked free and are temporarily contained within the picker. When the picker is full up, the berries are emptied into a larger capacity carrying basket/ bucket.

Such combs are only suitable to use on berry bushes with small leaves and thin branches which pass through the comb, e.g. bilberries, bog bilberries, Cowberries and crowberries. With a good berry picker it is possible to pick many kilograms in just a day! As an example, last year in a good location in Norway, using a 'berry scoop' (similar to the one detailed in the first design below) I managed to pick at least 15kg of bilberries in about three hours. That's plenty for making jam, cordial, and dried snacks!

Design #1 The Berry Scoop



For this project I recycled some items I had lying about: a mini wine crate and some tines from a broken garden rake. I realise it is unlikely that you will have the same materials, so you'll need to be a bit inventive too.

Plywood off-cuts or thin sawn timber are perfect for making the box. The comb can be made from flat rods (like my garden rake tines), or round, like knitting needles or carpentry nails. Either way, they should be pretty stiff. Metal is good if you have it, but I don't see why wood or bone couldn't be used. If experimenting with an all-wood version, I would imagine that yew or holly might work well as they are very strong.

The construction of your picker will depend on the materials you have, but here is how I put mine together...



Firstly, I disassembled the wine crate, then cut the pieces to more suitable dimensions to suit my design. Notice the angled front too. For reassembling I used both nails and wood glue.

Note: it is wise to carefully plan the internal width of the picker according to how many prongs you'll have and their spacing (specific prong spacing is mentioned further on...)

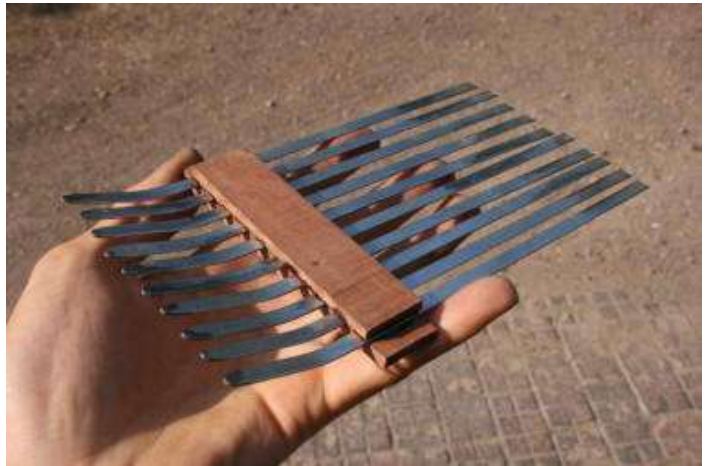


I fitted the handle next (an off-cut from another project) because it needed to be screwed in place from the inside, this wouldn't have been doable when the comb is fitted. Many other handle designs are possible...



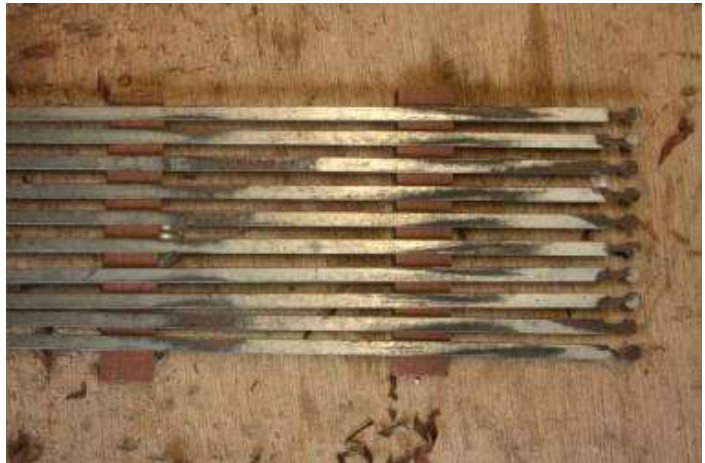
Next, I needed to make the comb. I had never physically inspected another berry picker of this kind before, so I had to make my best guess for the spacing between the prongs. I decided to go for approximately 6mm, thankfully this turned out to work well. I have since measured the spacing of the prongs on commercial pickers and found that they are spaced about the same.

Note: in this design, the metal prongs extend all the way to the back of the picker, providing the full bottom surface. This is not strictly necessary, a sheet of wood could have been used behind the comb. Having the prongs go all the way to the back does however allow a few of the caught-up leaves and other debris to fall through. It is also a strong design.

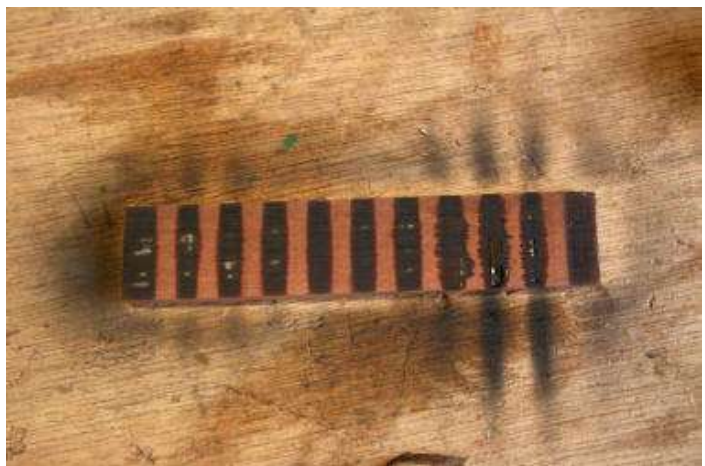


The next few pictures show how I assembled and fitted this comb.

I secured the prongs in place at the correct spacing between two slats of hardwood. I used something which looks like teak or mahogany, but oak, ash or beech would have worked fine. To ensure the prongs would be held permanently at an exact spacing I decided to recess each prong into a groove made in one of the slats. You'll see what I mean in the following pictures...



I laid out the prongs on top of one of the slats at EXACTLY the right spacing, then took a can of spray paint and sprayed over the prongs and wood.



I could then easily see where to carve the recesses

For this job I used a sharp knife and a palm chisel. A Stanley knife and a standard narrow woodworking chisel would work fine too.



I first made vertical cuts to establish the sides of the recesses, using a ruler to guide the knife.



Then I chiselled out the interior of each recess. More vertical cuts needed to be made every so often in order to get down to depth.



You can see here some of the recesses chiselled out to depth.



Before fitting the prongs, they needed to be cut to length with a hacksaw and cleaned up with some fine sand paper.

They were then sandwiched in place between the two slats of wood, using 24 hour epoxy glue for a reliable fix. To ensure everything was aligned perfectly, the assembly was placed in its final position until the glue had set.



A close up picture showing how the prongs are sandwiched between the two wooden slats.



All that remained was to fix the comb permanently in place. I used four small screws to secure the bottom wooden slat to the box, and more epoxy at the back end of each prong.



I also added a rectangle of thin plywood at the back for extra security.



Harvest time! Cowberries galore.



Design #2 The Cylinder Berry Comb

-A design using kebab skewers-
(Not yet field tested)

I have seen Ray Mears using something similar to this on TV, but with metal wire prongs instead. It gave me the idea to make a bamboo skewer version.



Start off by cutting some disks of wood. The ones here are 7cm in diameter.



On one of the discs, draw a border about the perimeter 1cm in from the edge. Then drill a large hole in the centre and remove all the wood up to the border line with a small chisel.



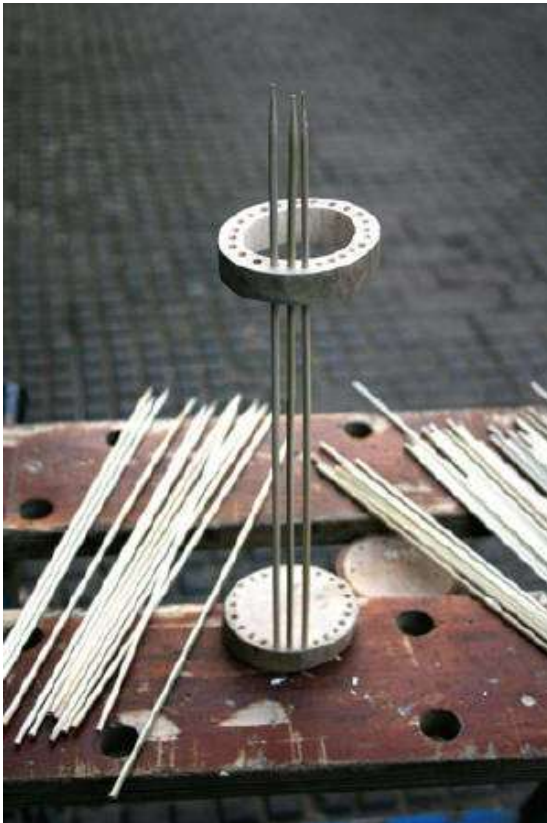
Sand the pieces for a smooth finish

Take your kebab skewers and find a drill bit which is the same diameter.

Drill holes at a suitable spacing around the edge of one of the disks.



Having drilled all the way around, place it on top of the other disk. Take a pin and put it through each hole to prick the disk of wood underneath. This should leave a slight mark to show you where to drill on the other disk. Alternatively, you could just clamp both disks together and drill them both at once.



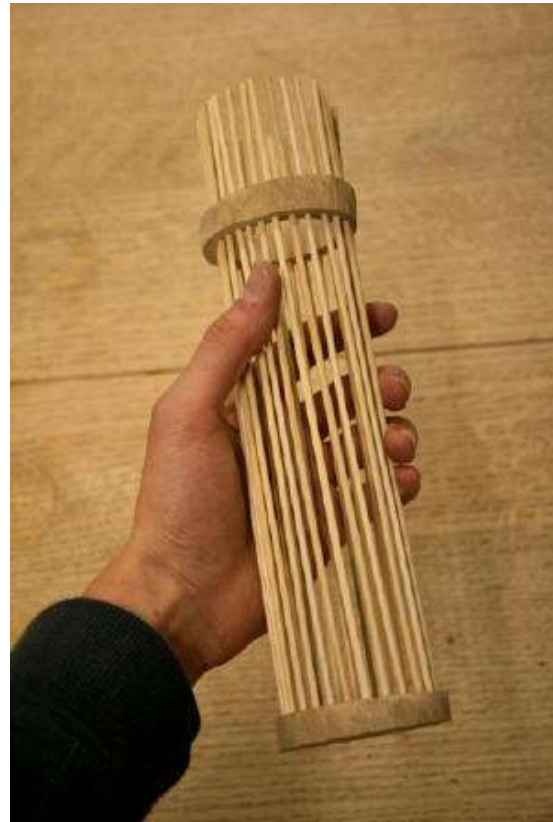
Once you have drilled all the holes for the skewers, thread them into place. Do one at a time, use glue for a secure fix



Finally, when they're all in, you can clip off the sharp points which may damage berries during harvest.



You could oil the disks of wood with food friendly oil, as I did.



The finished picker

Some Additional Notes...



Cowberries



Bilberries

In the UK bilberries and cowberries tend to ripen in late summer. Cowberries ripen a little later than the Bilberries



Apart from jam making, one way to preserve bilberries is to dry them like raisins. Spread them out one layer thick on a non-plastic surface in the sun (I use a cotton sheet). Bring them in at night to avoid dew, and watch out for rain! They need to dry fairly quickly to prevent mould developing. Inevitably there will be some leaves in your harvest, these can be separated out quite easily when dry. To do this, place some of the berries in a bowl, then swirl them around whilst blowing into the bowl, the leaves will be light enough to fly away. Any other heavier bits and twigs can be picked out.

Interestingly, Cowberries can simply be preserved by putting in glass jars and filling up with cold water, no heat needed. They last for months in this way because of their benzoic acid content. Personally I find the flavour a bit on the sour side, but a nice jam can be made for eating with meat, like cranberry sauce.

My favourite way to eat cowberries is to pick them on a very cold frosty morning when they are frozen on the bush, pick and eat at once. This is a much sweeter experience.